The Comanches

174 According to their own accounts, they came around 1700 from the
619 Rocky Mountain country, north of the headwaters of the Arkansas River, to the valley of that stream in what is now eastern Colorado and western Kansas. Previously they had inhabited the country with the Shoshones. Governor Anza in 1786 located them as ranging across present northern Colorado and south to the Arkansas River. The accounts indicate, however, that the Yap-eaters felt at home south of that stream also. During the nineteenth century they camped generally on the south side of the Arkansas River and along the Canadian, the Arkansas being considered the northern boundary of their territory. They raided, however, far north of that stream across Kansas and Nebraska.

Another populous band, although little known until towards the close of the pre-reservation period, is the Antelope or *Kwɔharɛnɔ*. The name of the band is indicative of its life on the open plains where antelope were plentiful. And because they lived and traveled on the
● [293] glaring, treeless plains, these Comanches carried on their backs a square of rawhide that could be held over the head as a sunshade. Hence they were also nicknamed *Kwahihɔkɛnɔ*, "Sunshades on Their Backs." William Clark called them Qua-he-hu-ke, which he said meant "back-shade," because in their treeless country the only way to shade the face was to turn one's back to the sun, but we doubt the correctness of this interpretation.[21] Before the Comanches migrated to the South Plains country, the Antelope band was located just south of the Yap-eaters. The two bands probably drifted south about the same time, and then the Antelopes made the *Llano Estacado* their home and challenged all intruders. Within the wild depths of the Tule and Palo Duro canyons they found protection from the winter blizzards of the uplands and safety from their enemies until Colonel MacKenzie bearded them in their stronghold on September 27, 1874. They harried the frontier of Texas as much, perhaps, as any other Comanche band, and they were the last of the Comanches to submit to the efforts of the United States to bring them under control. For years they scoffed at their beef-eating kinsmen on the reservation, and did not submit until they had been drubbed repeatedly by superior military forces. It has been argued that present-day Comanche

[21] W. P. Clark, *Indian Sign Language*, 119.

3: Wallace & Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933, 1945) 1952
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294 hide and boiled them down in water until the concoction made a glue-like sizing. It was spread over the surface to be decorated and [386] served as a fixer for the paint. The paints, which were mineral pigments in water, were pressed into the hide with the edge of a patella. After the design was completed, the hide was sized once again. Such [428] robes, although they could be buried with the owner at her funeral, were usually inherited by a younger sister.[25]

291 293 Both men and women normally went bareheaded, except in bad weather when the robe was pulled up to form a kind of temporary hood, but in later years many Comanches wore fur caps made of buffalo calf or coyote skins. Warriors sometimes wore a coiffure of buffalo horns or a hood made of the scalp of the buffalo with the horns attached in proper position as a part of their ceremonial attire. For special state or ceremonial occasions, feathers were worn as plumes or woven into a hood or war bonnet. The Indians of the East wore a narrow head band into which feathers were stuck upright, but the Comanches and other Plains Indians wore a kind of cap around which the feathers were placed so as to droop and spread backward, and not infrequently the cap supported a streamer.

293 Clark Wissler believes the war bonnet was not regularly worn prior to the reservation period by the Plains Indians, although by 1834 feathers were worn on the head as a badge of distinguished service throughout a wide area of the Plains.[26] His conclusion regarding the use of feathers by Plains Indians in general is fairly well substantiated by evidence regarding the Comanches. Had the war bonnet been worn, some of the early visitors would certainly have noted it. It was too conspicuous to have been overlooked. David G. Burnet mentioned the buffalo-horn headdress but not the war bonnet. Several accounts relate that feathers, particularly those of the eagle, were worn in the hair by warriors. Captain R. G. Carter, who was with Colonel MacKenzie in the campaigns against the Comanches in the eighteen seventies, was one of the first to mention feathered war bonnets of the "most unique and fantastical designs" as though they were regular and proper dress on special occasions.[27] They certainly never became

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Clark Wissler, *The Relations of Nature to Man in Aboriginal America*, 52–61.

[27] Carter, *On the Border with MacKenzie*, 283.

Food, Clothing, and Dwellings

nearly so important to the Comanches as they were to some tribes farther north. 293

The life of a Comanche warrior was rugged, but that did not keep him from spending a great deal of time at his toilet. He was especially proud of his hair, and in the village he might be seen daily combing, greasing, and braiding it. Men parted their hair from the center of the forehead back to the crown, forming a braid on each side, and made a streak of yellow, white, or red along the part. The braids were tied or wrapped with beaver fur or any other available material that appealed to the wearer's fancy. Beaver fur was worn on dress occasions. Bright-colored pieces of cloth, with red the most commonly recurring color, is used at the present time by the older men. Pieces of silver, beads, tin, glass, and single feathers were attached to the side locks as decorations. Each man also wore a scalp lock braided from the hair at the top of his head, and in it he usually wore a single yellow or black feather. Brushes, made from the tails of porcupines, were used for grooming the hair. The most common form was made by stretching the porcupine tail over a stick of wood. Hair brushes were also made by pounding out the fibres of a large yucca stalk. These fibers were gathered up and bound together with a buckskin thong and singed so as to burn off the sharp edges. The men never shaved, but carefully plucked all hair from their face and eyebrows with a pair of tweezers made of bone, leaving the whole face as smooth as a baby's cheek. A piece of door spring was used incessantly by Post Oak Jim through all the long hours of interviews in 1933. Comanche vanity went so far that narcissistic bucks begged for the hair that women cut off in mourning so that they could splice it into their braids to make them look longer. She Invites Her Relatives tells of one *tuißltsi* who was showing off at a dance. "He threw his side lock over his shoulder—and the attached end came off. Everybody hooted with laughter; he picked it up and went home." 302 [522]

Paint was an indispensable article of ornamentation for both sexes. Both men and women, when circumstances permitted, painted their faces before meeting strangers and for all special occasions. The Comanches always carried paint with them. Vermilion was much sought after, but when it could not be obtained from the white trader, paint was made from clays and from weed and berry juices. Black was the [386]

3: Wallace & Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933, 1945) 1952
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Big Looking Glass (Pianaronit), in 1894
Courtesy Bureau of American Ethnology

[Facing p. 111]

Warfare

Captives were bound and placed in the center of the circle, possibly tied to the scalp pole. Frequently one of the dancers left his position and in pantomime killed and scalped the captive. Sometimes captives were tortured by the dancers, even to death. When the dance began, the singing was low and the dancers moved in a slow to moderate pace, but as it continued, the pace was accelerated and the singing grew louder. The dance continued from two hours to two or more days, but normally terminated before the light of day.[27]

The contemporary Comanche Brush Dance still retains some of the features of the old Scalp Dance.

In 1933, at a Brush Dance put on by *Mʌmsɜkɔ*, the men and women danced back and forth in the old way before a tall pole on which Old Glory flew.

"That used to be a pole for scalps. At sunset we will bring down the flag," they said. "The man who brings down the flag has to be a good warrior. He has to tell about a coup first."

In each Comanche band there was a dance whip-holder. His whip was a wood blade with a serrated edge, and upon it were carved scalp symbols for the owner's victims. At the end of the whip were two short otter-skin lashes. In the old days there were one or two of these, owned by the bravest men in the band.

At any dance, the owner of the whip, which is called *pianɜ'ɜpai'i* (big whip), may stop the dance and recite a coup, ending his recital with a sun curse upon himself in testimony of its truth. He is a kind of master of ceremonies at the dance. He can dance up to any lounging spectator and point his whip. That person has to jump right in and dance—or be whipped.

Sometimes a warrior who could not dance for certain reasons wished to be excused; nevertheless, when the whip was pointed, he had to get up and dance. Then he could recite his strongest deed. The whip wielder next countered with his. If his deed was as good as the warrior's, the brave had to dance the rest of the time; if not,

[27] This account of the return of a successful party is compiled from statements by informants Yellowfish, Face Wrinkling Like Getting Old, and See How Deep the Water Is; also, Nystel, "Three Months among the Indians," *loc. cit.*, 38; Gregg, *op. cit.*, 436; Lee, *op. cit.*, 150; R. I. Dodge, *Our Wild Indians*, 359–60; Möllhausen, *op. cit.*, I, 184; Hoebel, *The Political Organization and Law-Ways of the Comanche Indians*, 27–28.

3: Wallace & Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933, 1945) 1952
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Gets to Be a Middle-aged Man (Tenewerka), in 1933, one of the Comanches who stole the horses from the stone corral at Fort Sill in 1878

Photograph by E. A. Hoebel

[Facing p. 334]

3: Wallace & Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933, 1945) 1952
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Albert Attocknie (Lone Tipi), in 1924
Courtesy Bureau of American Ethnology

[Facing p. 350]

3: Wallace & Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933, 1945) 1952
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Hair Hanging Down, in 1930
Courtesy Bureau of American Ethnology

[Facing p. 351]

6: Linton E-5 (1933)1935 NO6 Comanche NO6

796 535 dancers, but this was rarely the case since the buffalo were older men of established reputation while the dancers were usually young.

796 535 513 346 Early on this same morning the wives of the dancers, or, if they were unmarried, any of their close female relatives, made beds for them in the screened alcove at the western side of the lodge. These beds consisted of heaps of sage with robes over them. A large rounded heap of moist sand was also built. When the dancers were exhausted they would retire behind the screen and throw themselves upon this so that they would be revived by its dampness and coolness. After the beds had been made and the sand heap built no one was allowed behind the screen except the medicine man and the actual dancers.

796 535 783 515 The crier warned everyone who wished to attend the dance to bathe that morning. The dancers also bathed. This was a common preliminary to seeking to establish relations with the supernatural, as when a man was going to a medicine man's grave to get power from his ghost. It was a form of purification or consecration, although in this case it was not attended by any ceremony.

796 535 [534] After the noon meal the people went into the lodge and the dance began. The drummers, old men who also led in the singing, seated themselves near the door or about the fire place. Unfortunately, the location of the fire place in the lodge was not ascertained. They had a large circular drum or drums of the sort used in ordinary dances. These drums were beaten by several men simultaneously. They also carried rattles which apparently could be of any sort. The spectators, both men and women, seated themselves around the sides of the lodge three or four deep.

796 535 302 [293] While the audience and orchestra were taking their places, the dancers went behind the screen with the medicine man and painted themselves. Often they helped to paint each other. This painting seems to have been rather varied. In the ceremony in which the roofless lodge was used all the dancers painted solid yellow. In that with the closed lodge each dancer was painted differently and there was a variety of colors and designs. All informants agreed that, although the paint was renewed each morning of the ceremony, each man wore the same designs throughout. The dancers were stripped to breech clout and moccasins and carried no paraphernalia except their eagle bone whistles. None of these were seen, but they are described as identical with those used by other Plains tribes in the Sun Dance.

796 535 They were usually eight to twelve dancers. When they first emerged from behind the screen they danced with their arms stretched toward the sun, but as they became exhausted they dropped their arms and merely moved their shoulders with a shrugging motion, stamping at the same

6: Linton E-5 (1933) 1935 NO6 Comanche NO6

time. Each time they shrugged and stamped they blew a short blast on the eagle bone whistle. When certain special songs were sung all the spectators would join in, rise and dance too to encourage them. The medicine man stayed behind the screen most of the time, but when the dancers seemed to be flagging he would come out and reinvigorate them. He would do this by taking his fan, made of the tail feathers of the road-runner, and, while holding it horizontal, sweep it around in a circle from left to right. As he swept it around he blew along it and each dancer, as it came in line with him, began to dance hard again.

From time to time, apparently whenever interest was flagging, one of the spectators would come forward and hang a gift of some sort on the center pole. While doing so he would pray for a long and happy life. Small boys were encouraged to shoot arrows into the fork of the pole as their offerings. These offerings were sacred and could not be touched. When the people went away at the end of the dance the things were simply left there to be destroyed by the elements. However, visitors from other tribes who happened to be present during the dance could put an offering on the pole and take down something else in exchange. One informant, when a small boy, had visited a Kiowa Sun Dance lodge after the dance and had, on the advice of his grandfather, exchanged his old breech clout for a new one hanging on the pole. When they got back to camp their own people said that this was dishonest.

According to Post Oak Jim, the informant mentioned above, the medicine man in charge might come out from time to time and do sleight of hand tricks to show his power. He might put a knife down his throat and bring it up covered with blood. Then he would blow on the blade and the blood would disappear. Sick people might also call on the medicine man for special help during the dance, although whether he treated them on the spot was not ascertained. No other informants mentioned these features, but healing is such a frequent element in Comanche ceremonies that they may well have taken it for granted. All the spectators were believed to benefit by the ceremony and to go away improved in health and spirits.

On the first day the dance ran from early in the afternoon until sunset. There was then a halt of about two hours to rest and eat, after which the dance began again and continued until midnight. After the evening session had ended, the dancers went down to the creek under guard of a man chosen by the medicine man and bathed. They sat and splashed in the water but were forbidden to dive in or to drink. They then returned and slept behind the screen on the beds prepared for them. They danced the next morning, afternoon, and evening, with intervals at noon and night for them to rest

19: Lowie E-5 (1912) 1915 NO6 Comanche NO6

their drums. There was a strict rule, that no dog must run ahead of the performers lest it be shot; so women would bid their children take care of any dogs they prized. Sometimes, however, a man who specially liked his dog might be asked to sacrifice it on this occasion. This taboo may have been common to several groups of dancers, but dogs were certainly especially offensive to those of the Crow division.

During any of the dances the managers would threaten to strike laggards with clubs.

About the other dances I was only able to learn that the Horses and Little Horses wore buffalo-skin sashes that lacked the slit found elsewhere, and used rawhide rattles, decorated with yellow-hammer feathers; the Horses also had spears, trimmed with eagle feathers.

When the master of the nä'wapinàr had decided that the time for action had arrived, he caused the dancing to cease and had the Comanche prepare for the warpath. On the night before setting out the tribesmen assembled, coming in pairs toward the front and in single file behind. Then occurred the ceremony called nïotsäit'. The women brought a buffalo hide and sticks. Some men held up one side of the hide, while the women held the opposite side, and all belabored it with the sticks, a special song being intoned by the master alone and taken up by the rest.[1]

On the next day the Comanche started against the enemy, led by the master. They appointed scouts to determine the hostile tribe's position. On their return buffalo chips were piled up, and the leader went in front of the heap to sing a war song. The pile of chips represented a sort of oath to the effect that the enemy's camp was really situated in the place specified, and also marked a spot for the Comanche to return to. After a successful raid public thanks were rendered to those who had avenged the injury. Scalps were set on a pole and carried aloft by the main chief as he rode ahead on the return trip. His body was stripped to the waist and painted black. War songs were chanted and guns were discharged as the party came back. Those who had remained in camp saw the scalp and knew that the injury had been avenged.

A number of questions were asked to determine traces of typical elements of military societies as found among the Plains tribes. In reply to one of these queries I was told that some warriors had hooked sticks with a long spear point at the bottom, the bent part being decorated with two pairs of eagle feathers. I could not ascertain that these regalia were correlated with a special tribal division or dance. Again, I learned that there were

[1] This ceremony has been noted among the Nez Percé, Lemhi Shoshone, and Crow. The last-mentioned tribe borrowed it from the (Wind River) Shoshone.

31: Jones E-5 (1967-1970) 1972 NO6 Comanche NO6
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Yapai Comanche band "chief" in 1890. Sanapia's maternal grandfather.